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The CIA's Real Function

When Harry Truman says that the Central Intelligence Agency has been diverted from its original assignment and that there is cause for worry, we worry. Mr. Truman created the CIA to coordinate the intelligence functions of government and to eliminate duplication. Now that all has been thoroughly centralized, the former President wonders if the resulting Leviathan has not appropriated an exclusively executive function.

"It (the CIA) has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the government. This has led to trouble and may have compounded our difficulties in several explosive areas," Mr. Truman writes.

Has the CIA become a policy-making force? Mr. Truman's complaint that the agency is being widely interpreted as "a symbol of sinister and mysterious foreign intrigue" is certainly justified. Whatever the CIA means to Americans, it has taken on cloak-and-dagger aspects to many foreign observers.

This is not in itself bad. Intelligence is tough work, mean work, clandestine work — even sinister work. It has to be done all the same. It is the CIA's job to do this work, not to win popularity contests overseas.

The CIA's function, however, is interpreting out information, not translating it into action or policy. Allen Dulles, in his book "The Craft of Intelligence" argues that the value of the CIA is that it is not a policy-making body and therefore cannot fall into the error of trying to suit the facts to the policy.

The danger is perhaps the reverse of this proposition: Given what it takes to be the salient facts, can the CIA resist acting in a way to set policy in Washington? Isn't it tempted to use its fact-producing apparatus to generate policy? Harry Rowe Ransom in his study, "Central Intelligence and National Security" reminds us that the danger is that a secret intelligence operation can become "a vehicle for conspiracy or a suppressor of the traditional liberties of democratic self-government."

Mr. Truman and Mr. Dulles agree on one point: Only the president can see to it that the CIA does not overstep its bounds. President Johnson is much closer to what is happening now than either Mr. Truman or Mr. Dulles. He ought to make the CIA's business his business. He ought to see to it that the CIA's contribution to setting policy is getting the facts, just the facts and nothing more.